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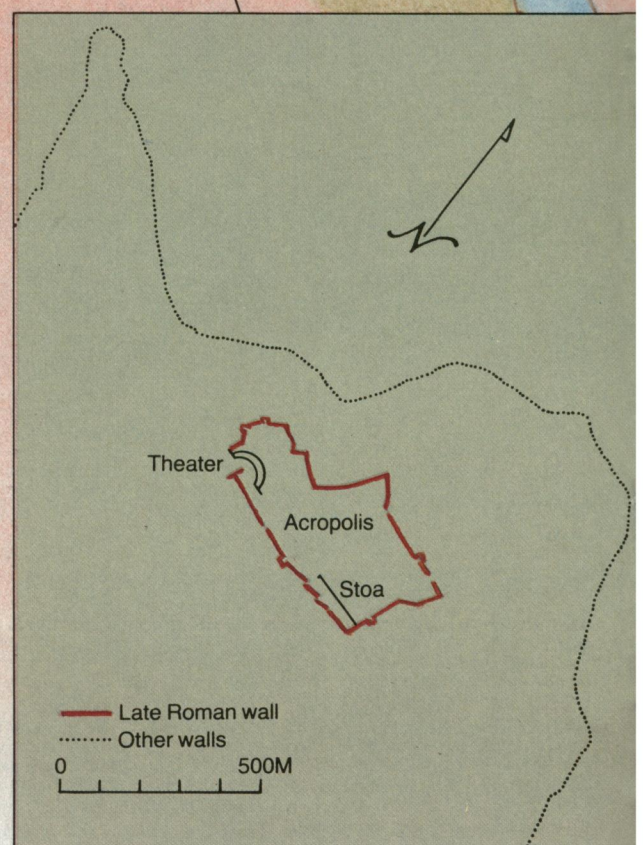


# The Fortified Cities of Byzantine Greece

by TIMOTHY GREGORY

**T**he collapse of Roman civilization in the third and fourth centuries after Christ was devastating in the most literal sense. As the frontiers of a once safe empire eroded, barbarian hordes descended on the age-old centers of the classical world. The enormity of the loss is difficult to contemplate, and at the time, the sudden rupture of a cherished way of life was unthinkable for many. For the cities of the ancient world, the alteration was particularly stressful, especially because their defensive walls—rendered anachronistic by the long-enduring peace—had been allowed to crumble or else had been destroyed.

The cities of southern Greece, the home of classical civilization, had been in existence for a millennium when the crisis struck. While not all of these cities had prospered under the Roman Empire, many nonetheless retained their ancient buildings and prized urban monuments, and some still sheltered lively industries and cultural institutions. These cities, like those throughout the Roman Empire, faced the acute and sudden need to refortify themselves, and they did so with varying measures of success. But while most of the cities in the western Roman provinces reverted to fortresses as the ancient world collapsed around them, the urban centers in the east survived at least the initial storm of barbarian invasions. As the Byzantine age grew out of the classical past, the transformation was at times characterized more by continuity than by a violent break.









The story of the refortification of Greek cities is an interesting one. It brings together tales of individual daring and courage with architectural curiosities and the complexities of urban administration on both an imperial and a more local scale. It also constitutes a fascinating chapter in the history of warfare, since the coming of the barbarians ushers in the Middle Ages, and commences an epoch in Europe which was not to change definitively for many hundreds of years. The refortification of Greek cities was an ongoing process that stretched well into the Byzantine period. Beginning in Athens under the emperor Valerian (reigned A.D. 253-60), it gradually embraced most major Greek cities as the country was subjected to a succession of invaders—at first the Goths and Heruli from the north; later the Visigoths under Alaric; and then other Germans, Avars, Slavs, Arabs, Bulgars, and Magyars. In some cases, the cities fell to the invaders, but more often the inhabitants resisted—as they did in Thessalonica and Constantinople farther north—and the fortified cities served as isles of Hellenism amid a sea of barbarism.

**T**he refortifying of Athens plays a major part in the story, and includes the period from Valerian's reign on into the Byzantine period. It is not entirely clear who refurbished the ancient walls of Themistokles in Athens, but Valerian appears to be the likely candidate since written sources mention the activity of this emperor in Greece. What is certain, however, is that prior to the first major barbarian onslaught, which occurred in A.D. 267, the ancient Athenian walls were rebuilt and extended to encompass the section of the city built a century earlier by the emperor Hadrian (A.D. 117-38). Valerian may also have been responsible for the reconversion of the Acropolis into a fortress, a function it had not served for over seven centuries since the attempt by the Athenians to defend their city against the Persians in 480 B.C. Restoring it to this role involved the construction of the Beulé Gate, named for its discoverer, the Frenchman E. Beulé, and very probably the reopening of the Clypsedra Spring on the northwest side of the Acropolis.

The construction of the Beulé Gate typifies a pattern in many refortifying projects throughout Greece—the reuse of older architectural elements in a partially successful aesthetic effort to retain some of the flavor of the previous structures. In this case, pieces of the fourth-century choregic monument of Nikias were used in the construction of the gate. The Nikias monument was originally built near the Theater of Dionysus on the south slope of the Acropolis to commemorate Nikias' victory in the dramatic contests, but by the third century after Christ the needs of defense compelled its demolition. The new structure was built across the west end of the Acropolis, blocking its main entrance, the Propylea, and making the citadel resistant to attack again.

The architects of the gate took considerable care in its construction; they tried to reproduce as much of the original monument as possible in its new military setting. In this effort, they incorporated most of the façade of the choregic monument, including the cornices, Doric frieze and epistyle blocks, complete with the identifying inscription. In order to reassemble the pieces in the correct order, the workmen cut letters on some of the blocks while still in the original position, and then put them up in the proper order to avoid unnecessary cutting and fitting, and to prevent mixing up the various elements of the temple-like façade. The side towers of the gate, however, were apparently constructed before

the actual entrance. When the workers began putting the reused blocks in position, they found that the façade of the gate was not the same width as that of the choregic monument, and the blocks did not make a perfect fit. Undaunted and temporarily forgetting their aesthetic sense, the builders took another block, this time from the opposite end of the Nikias monument, crudely cut it down and stuck it in place. The result was the infelicitous conjunction of two architectural pieces, something the original numbering system had sought to avoid.

The incorporation of the Clypsedra Spring into the renewed Acropolis walls involved a serious alteration in the spring's earlier form. Gushing from a cave near the base of the Acropolis at its northwest corner, this source had been adorned with a monumental fountain house as early as the fifth century B.C. Over the centuries, however, the roof of the cave had collapsed, and the spring was rendered unusable. At some time around the first barbarian onslaught, it was once again put into commission; the earlier façade was blocked up firmly with a cement-and-rubble construction, and a new entrance was opened, providing exclusive access to the spring from above via a long vaulted passageway. The citadel was thus assured a supply of fresh water in the event of a siege.

The new walls, as it turned out, did not have long to wait before they were seriously tested. In A.D. 267, a band of Heruli and Goths descended



*The Hexamilion at the Sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia was constructed using materials from the ancient site. Several inscriptions and statues were found built into the defenses at this point.*



on Greece and attacked Athens. Unfortunately the restored fortifications were not sufficient. The attackers swarmed over the city, wreaking a destruction confirmed by the thick layers of ash encountered in excavations all over Athens. The city had not suffered anything so devastating since the Persian sack of 480 B.C.

Yet the Athenians rallied to their own defense. Under the leadership of the aristocratic historian P. Herennius Dexippus, one of the leading figures of the day who had recently held office in Athens, they harassed the barbarians who were probably encamped in the open expanse between the city and the sea. Ultimately, the imperial Roman fleet arrived and drove the Heruli away. But the attack had left at least the lower city a smoking ruin with most of its once grand buildings completely destroyed.

Modern scholars disagree as to whether the Heruli stormed the Acropolis in A.D. 267. According to one view, the barbarians damaged the Parthenon so seriously that the emperor Julian (A.D. 361-63) had to rebuild it a century later. There is, however, little evidence for this, and the new fortifications on the ancient hill of Athens seem to have kept the invaders at bay. In any case, the ancient Agora lay desolate for some time, perhaps for more than a century. But the citizens lost no time in taking fresh precautions lest a similar disaster befall the city in years to come.

Apparently without direct imperial intervention, the city's wealthy inhabitants contributed to the refortification of Athens. Such, at any rate, is the sense of three inscriptions in which the contributors boast of their benefactions. Two of these complain amusingly about the ease with which Amphion, the legendary founder of Thebes, built a wall by charming the stones into place with the music of his lyre: obviously wall-building in the third century was a much more difficult—and expensive—task. The third inscription characteristically laments that contemporary wall-builders did not have the help of the Cyclops in their prodigious undertaking.

The wall mentioned in these inscriptions is almost certainly the one still visible today on the ancient



*This south gate of the wall at Sparta may have been cut into the wall at a later date.*



*This fortress wall at Aigina still stands as testimony to successful fortification in late antiquity. Decorative alternation of courses as well as ancient inscriptions, many of them upside down or sideways, were used to decorate the exterior.*

Agora's eastern side, where it has been cleared by the ongoing excavations of the American School of Classical Studies. While some question may remain as to who built the wall, there can be little doubt about the period of its construction, which can be dated from a group of coins found embedded in its mortar. These coins, probably dropped by a careless workman, include one of the emperor Probus (A.D. 276-82), securely dating the project to the last quarter of the third century.

The wall runs from the northwest corner of the Acropolis near the Clypsedra Fountain down into the

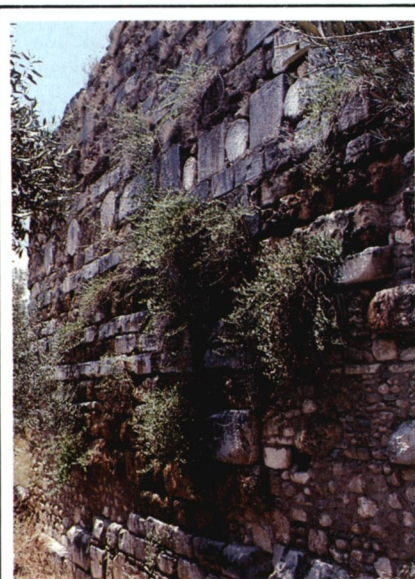
Agora. Its route leaves both the ancient Panathenaic Way and the Agora itself outside the defenses. Along this western stretch, the wall is frequently built on the foundations of ancient buildings, and it incorporates the back wall of the Stoa of Attalos as part of its façade. On this side stood several powerful square towers—one was still standing in the late nineteenth century when it was represented in a watercolor. Three gates stood along this stretch; the middle gate accommodated the ancient street running from the Roman Agora westward into the Greek Agora—stirring evidence of the tenacity of the ancient urban plan even in a time of difficulty and change. From the end of the Stoa of Attalos the wall turned east and ran along the south side of the Library of Hadrian. After some distance the wall went south once again, and ran up to attach itself to the east end of the Acropolis. Thus, there was a double fortification system, with the previously walled Acropolis serving as an inner circuit while the center of the lower town, about 40 acres in all, was enclosed by the new wall.

The Late Roman wall at Athens was built with two parallel faces of rectangular cut blocks, about three meters apart, set in a fine mortar. The space between the two faces was filled with rubble and architectural pieces from buildings destroyed in the Herulian raid. The facing blocks were almost all reused as well, and it has been possible to identify and even partly reconstruct some build-





*The interior of the Late Roman wall in Athens is strewn with columns which came from the buildings of ancient Athens destroyed by the barbarians.*



*The east wall at Sparta was constructed of reused material including columns and well-cut blocks from buildings of the ancient city. These were arranged in a decorative attempt to imitate a Doric frieze.*

ings simply from the fragments built into this newer wall. Among these are the Temple of Ares, an otherwise unknown temple of the fifth century B.C., and the Library of Pantainos whose inscribed dedication was carefully set in a prominent place on the wall's east façade.

Like the architects of the Beulé Gate, those responsible for the construction of this wall were concerned not only with practical utility, but also with the appearance of the structure. They took great care to arrange the reused blocks into regular courses and to give the whole a

certain functional beauty. Among their favorite devices, predictably enough, was the alternation of courses, the regular interspersing of courses of short blocks and higher blocks. Such care is also indicated by an inscription found on this defense wall which speaks of the "magnificent" restoration of a tower damaged in war. This concern for appearance is sufficient evidence to illustrate that the wall was not thrown up hastily in the face of a sudden advance. In addition, this care also shows that the builders still regarded their construction as a great public work. Perhaps they did not have either the skill or the resources

to quarry new stones, but they nonetheless took the materials they had at hand and created a monument intended to beautify as well as protect.

**I**t was little more than a century later, in A.D. 396, that Alaric, King of the Visigoths, descended on Greece. Alaric laid siege to Athens, but he was supposedly terrified by the miraculous appearance of Athena and Achilles, both fully armed, on the city's defensive walls. According to pagan sources, the appearance of these deities so unnerved Alaric that he came to terms with the Athenians. He was admitted to the city, entertained by the aristocrats, and lavished with presents. He later went on his way, ravishing other cities farther to the south.

Obviously this story paints a more pleasant picture than what really happened. Recent archaeological evidence discovered in the Agora and the Kerameikos suggests that Alaric did indeed wreak some destruction in the city. It may be, however, that the literary and archaeological records can be reconciled: did Alaric force his way through the dilapidated and undermanned old walls of Themistokles, only to be brought up short by the more recently constructed Late Roman fortification? Such a turn of events provides a literal reading for the mythopoeic explanation. In actuality, Alaric may very well have found himself unprepared for and unwilling to undertake a long and



*The Late Roman fortification in Athens bordered the ancient Agora and used the Stoa of Attalos (background) as one of its faces.*





*The Beulé Gate in Athens closed and fortified the only entrance to the ancient Acropolis. One mistake made by the builders was in the third cornice from the right, which is smaller than the rest since it had to be fitted into an irregular space.*

difficult siege when there was easier unwall'd prey farther south. The foresight of the Athenians, if this were the case, was consequently vindicated, and the Late Roman fortifications probably spared their city the worst of the Visigoth invasion.

In Corinth, Sparta and many other cities, however, the Visigoths wrought considerable destruction. These cities apparently were not walled at the time and were defenseless against the marauding Alaric. Ultimately, he was driven out of Greece by the arrival of Roman troops under the command of Stilicho—himself a German who had risen to high office in the Roman army. But not before he had visited his cruelty upon the Peloponnesus. The Visigoths apparently mistreated the Christian clergy and stabled their horses inside churches. A contemporary author describes the barbarians on the march carrying rich booty, slaves and even ancient statues.

In the wake of Alaric's departure, the shattered cities of Greece began to rise from their ashes. In some cases, the recovery was a remarkably rapid one and in many cities the reconstruction included new fortifications. Such was the case in Corinth, where a wall was constructed on substantially different principles from those employed at Athens. Excavations indicate that the wall at Corinth dates to the early fifth century, almost certainly as a reaction to the invasion of Alaric.



*The tower at Corinth was triangular, and its outer surface was built in an irregular fashion to give it a rough military appearance.*

Although noticeably smaller than the enormous classical circuit that had encircled Corinth since as early as the seventh century, the new Late Roman wall was considerably larger than the one built at Athens. Moreover, while the Athenian wall included the Acropolis and a small section of the lower city, the Corinthian wall encompassed the entire ancient city except the heights of Akrocorinth. This meant that the forum area, originally built by the Romans to replace the earlier Greek agora, lay inside the fortifications.

Corinth was the capital of the

province—a province which included all of Greece south of Thermopylae—and the governmental offices were presumably located in or near the forum. This may explain why the civic center of Corinth was enclosed within the walls of Corinth, while at Athens the ancient Agora was left outside. Like the wall at Athens, the Corinthian fortification had powerful defensive towers. A depiction of a city in the Vienna Genesis, a richly illustrated manuscript from the sixth century after Christ, gives a fanciful idea of how contemporary city fortifications might have appeared—dominated by the large projecting towers. A more realistic but still impressive view can be seen in the massive walls of Thessalonica or Constantinople. At Corinth one tower has been explored at a point east of the ancient city center. On the triangular outer face of this tower, the stones overlap each other in every other course. This was not the result of inept work, indicated by the fact that the stones were deliberately cut to achieve this sort of rustication. The effect, aesthetically, is fittingly military in flavor.

The wall at Corinth was constructed of parallel faces of ashlar blocks, many of them reused. The core was made of rubble and architectural fragments; unlike the wall in Athens, whose core was dry and loosely packed, the Corinthian one was set in a very hard cement. Facing blocks were normally laid as "stretchers," with their long face parallel to the course of the wall, but an occasional block was a "header" which projected into the cement core. Such stones bound the face of the wall firmly to the rubble, and helped to make the whole wall exceptionally hard and durable.

Despite the large area which the Corinthian wall enclosed, some people apparently lived outside the fortifications. Ceramic evidence suggests that especially along the eastern side there was substantial occupation in the zone beyond the wall. Likewise, the major Early Christian churches, with the exception of the newly discovered basilica on Temple Hill, were all located outside the fortifications, often near the major gates in the wall. Akrocorinth was also occupied at the time the wall was built, as coins and an Early Christian church discovered there demonstrate, but its security in this



period must have depended on its height and the walls of the lower town.

**S**parta was another city fortified during the Late Roman era. Its wall presents a pattern different yet again from those at Athens and Corinth. Here the acropolis alone, rather than the lower city, was fortified. Why this was done is not clear—certainly it was not because Sparta had sunk into insignificance. All indications, including much evidence from the lower town, suggest that Sparta was a thriving community from the fourth to sixth centuries. Private baths and rich houses, many of them with splendidly colored mosaics, have been found in the lower city and date to this time. The answer may lie in the geographical nature of the acropolis, which is not very high or steep, but which occupies a considerable extent of flat land. Indeed, during the Middle Ages, the entire city—known then as Lakedaimonia—was enclosed within these walls.

Dating the Spartan walls has been more problematic. Estimates have ranged from the time of the Herulian attack in A.D. 267 to the reign of Justinian (A.D. 527-65) and beyond. British excavators concluded earlier in the century that the wall was built in at least two stages, something which is most unlikely given the necessity of completing a defensive circuit before it can



*The Late Roman wall at Athens skirts the ancient Panathenaic Way, the sacred road through the center of the city.*

do much good. They were, it seems, led astray by what they perceived as two distinct methods of construction, corresponding to what was believed to be separate periods.

One of the methods utilized parallel facing blocks and a rubble and cement core; the other was simply rubble. It is certainly true that repairs were made to the wall at various times, but there is no indication that any part of the original circuit was ever built without the ashlar facing blocks, as the early excavators suggested. What these investigators took to be rubble construction was simply the cement and rubble core of the wall where the facing

blocks had been torn away. Several header blocks can still be seen projecting from the core where they had originally been placed as part of the wall facing.

One of the most interesting features of the wall at Sparta is an exceptionally well-preserved stretch along its eastern side. Standing today to a height of about five meters, it is built almost entirely of blocks taken from the ancient structure of the city, and arranged in a careful and decorative manner. At the bottom are three courses of white marble blocks; above are regular courses of stone, each arranged according to color and texture; and about two-thirds of the way to the top is a course made of alternating square blocks and column drums set horizontally—the design an obvious attempt to reproduce the effect of the Doric frieze. Even today, the wall's appearance is most impressive, and is yet another example of the real concern to produce something of aesthetic as well as practical appeal.

On the grounds of its construction, the wall at Sparta should be compared with the one at Corinth, and probably dated to the early fifth century as well. Fortunately, there is some specific evidence to corroborate such a date. The Spartan wall reused many blocks from the ancient buildings of the city. Among these are seats and other fragments from the theater which was in use through the fourth century. Evidence for partial refurbishing of the



*At Epidauros the Late Roman wall enclosed only a small part of the ancient city. Many inscriptions and seats from the ancient theater were built into the new wall.*



theater as late as A.D. 375 consists of an inscription dedicating the work to the emperor. Clearly, the seats were still *in situ* at that time, ruling out a date for the construction of the wall before the end of the fourth century. Probably—much as the British excavators had surmised—Alaric's invasion put the theater out of use, and the defensive wall was constructed shortly thereafter.

Elsewhere in Greece, defense walls of similar construction can be found at a number of sites: at ancient Epidauros—the city, not the more famous sanctuary of Aesclepius; at Aigina; and at ancient Korone in Messenia, modern Petalidi. No external evidence exists to date these walls, but it is reasonable to assign them to the same period in the early fifth century. The great wall across the Isthmus of Corinth—the Hexamilion, whose name means the "six-miler," the approximate distance from one side of the Isthmus to the other—was also apparently constructed at this time, and not at the time of Justinian as was previously thought. Excavation has provided good evidence of this date in the form of graves built up against the wall and coins found in the roadway giving access to the Peloponnesus through one of its gateways. Still well-preserved in many stretches, and particularly impressive at the fortress near the ancient sanctuary of Poseidon at Isthmia, the Hexamilion is constructed with the same techniques as the city walls of Corinth and Sparta: two faces of large cut blocks with a cement and rubble core between them.

While the aristocrats of Athens probably refurbished the city walls at their own expense in the third century, the wall-building activity which occurred in the fifth century was very likely sponsored by the Imperial Roman government. Undoubtedly, the cities were at least partly responsible for financing these walls, but the impetus for construction seems to have come from the Byzantine capital—Constantinople. Two factors suggest this: first, the contemporaneity of the building program throughout Greece—suggesting that some power greater than the individual cities was responsible—and second, the involvement of at least two imperial officials in the work.

Thus, an inscription from

Megara refers to the construction of towers for the city by the Count (*comes*) Diogenes at a cost of 20,000 gold pieces—something less, incidentally, than he spent for the replacement of the marble façade of a public bath. The second public official was Herculus, Praetorian Prefect from A.D. 408 to 412, described by another inscription from Megara as "guardian" of the islands and the cities of Greece, and otherwise known as responsible for considerable building activity in Athens. Although his Prefecture extended over much of the Balkans, Herculus was particularly fond of Greece. His term of office corresponds to the period when many of the walls were built in Greece and it included the year in which Alaric sacked Rome in A.D. 410. Either because of his own concern for the cities or because of an imperial government which had been shocked by the fall of the ancient capital, Herculus may well have coordinated the massive effort at fortification throughout Greece.

In any event, the evidence seems clear that the lesson was learned from Alaric the barbarian. Following the earlier example of Athens, the cities were fortified against subsequent attack. Once the immediate danger had passed, however, the walls were not always carefully maintained, and their disintegration began even within the century. On the other hand, they had been solidly constructed and helped the cities withstand the first period of barbarian assault; in times of danger they were suitably refurbished.

By the time of the Crusades, in the eleventh century, warfare had changed considerably. The invention of gunpowder in the fifteenth century would render the old fortifications completely out of date. New fortresses were constructed, occasionally on the foundations of the Late Roman works, but the old walls had done their job. They had eased the ancient world into the Middle Ages. Many historians believe that the so-called Dark Ages at the end of classical antiquity is a myth. It is more likely that classical civilization in the eastern Mediterranean merged slowly into Mediaeval Byzantium and the Arab East. Many factors contributed to this transformation, not least among them the construction of fortresses in late antiquity—walls designed to

protect and encapsule small islands of the glorious classical past even in the face of their inevitable fate.

FOR FURTHER READING on Athens in late antiquity: Alison Frantz, "From Paganism to Christianity in the Temples of Athens," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19 (1965): 187-205; Fergus Millar, "P. Herennius Dexippus: The Greek World and the Third Century Invasion," *Journal of Roman Studies* 59 (1969): 12-29; Homer A. Thompson, "Athenian Twilight: A.D. 267-600," *Journal of Roman Studies* 49 (1959): 61-72; John Travlos, *Poleodomiki Exelexis ton Athinon* (Athens 1960) and *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* (New York 1971), are important for the monuments of Athens and their transformation in late antiquity.

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